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SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

Olivia D. Howe

THIRTY-FOUR democratically elected heads of state met in April at the fifth Summit of the Americas that took place in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. This year, the Summit was focused on promoting “human prosperity, energy security, environmental sustainability, public security and democratic governance.”¹ The Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Ambassador Albert Ramdin, explained that the fifth Summit was particularly interesting and important for four reasons: the Caribbean was able to reaffirm its commitment to the Americas by hosting the Summit for the first time in the area; this was the first Summit for two thirds of the thirty-four democratic leaders that attended; the region is facing many critical challenges including energy, food, and financial crises that needed to be addressed; and it was newly-elected United States President Barack Obama’s first Summit.²

I. SUCCESSES

Simply holding the Summit in Trinidad and Tobago was a success for the area because President Obama found it important to spend two full days there despite the global economic crisis, and because it helped the Caribbean region to “assert itself as a willing and able broker among some of the world’s major power blocs.”³ In addition to the Summit’s benefit to the area, several of the key players attending the Summit stated explicitly that the Summit itself was a success. President Obama said it was “very productive and proved that hemispheric progress is possible if countries set aside stale debates and old ideologies.”⁴ Jose Miguel Insulza, the Secretary General of the OAS stated that the Summit was an even greater success than expected.⁵ Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper also praised the Summit as a great success and credited the Carib-

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1. Summit of the Americas: An Introduction, <http://www.america.gov/st/peacesec-english/2009/April/20090406123831dmslahrellek0.1010248.html> (last visited June 6, 2009).
 2. *Summit of Americas to make OAS Stronger, Says Assistant Secretary General Ramdin*, US STATE NEWS, April 9, 2009.
 3. Bert Wilkinson, *Caribbean Shines at Summit; Hopeful of New Chapter with U.S.*, N.Y. AMSTERDAM NEWS, Apr. 23, 2009.
 4. CNN.com, *Obama: Summit of the Americans ‘Productive’*, Apr. 19, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/19/obama.latin.america/>.
 5. *OAS Secretary General Undertakes Mandates from Summit of Americas*, STATES NEWS SERVICE, Apr. 21, 2009 [hereinafter *OAS Secretary*].

bean Community (CARICOM) countries and President Obama.⁶

Many of those who credit the Summit with success do so because of the surprisingly cordial nature with which the various meetings took place.⁷ Despite other successes, "the generally amicable atmosphere will remain the distinguishing feature of the three days in Trinidad and Tobago" according to the New York Times.⁸ The congeniality actually "confounded critics who had anticipated a battle between the member states," according to Prime Minister Harper.⁹

Prime Minister Harper pointed to this replacement of confrontation with genuine dialogue and good chemistry among the leaders as one of the most successful parts of the Summit.¹⁰ Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Patrick Manning also pointed out that "the chemistry was key."¹¹ Even Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said the Summit was the most successful summit he had attended in a decade because "a new atmosphere had been created among the countries of the Americas" and it "opened the doors to a new era of reasoning among all countries."¹² Despite past tensions, relations seemed to warm even between America and Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez who indicated that he may like to send an ambassador to Washington.¹³

In addition to the positive chemistry, Secretary General Insulza pointed to the agenda set at the Summit as one of its successes.¹⁴ The agenda included addressing "crisis, unemployment, inequality and poverty, trade, energy, global warming, crime and violence and. . . migration" and provided the "beginning of a route-plan" for the hemisphere.¹⁵ He explained that as a result of the Summit, goals were set for the OAS such as possibly "calling a Conference on Development, a Meeting of Consultation for the Continent to develop a common policy towards the Meeting on Climate. . . , studying the exclusion of Cuba from the Inter-American System, analyzing the viability of development programs in Haiti and strengthening the leadership at the Joint Summit Working Group."¹⁶ Additionally, the Summit left the OAS with "a series of open issues to be dealt with as mandates" including the content of Declaration

6. *Venezuelan President Says Summit of Americas "Close to Perfection"*, BBC MONITORING LATIN AM., Apr. 21, 2009 [hereinafter *Summit of Americas "Close to Perfection"*].

7. *Id.*

8. Alexei Barrionuevo & Sheryl Gay Stolberg, *Hemisphere's Leaders Signal Fresh Start With U.S.*, Apr. 19, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/20/world/americas/20prexy.html?r=1&scp=2&sq=&st=nyt> (last visited June 6, 2009).

9. *Summit of Americas "Close to Perfection"*, *supra* note 6.

10. *Id.*

11. *Obama Wows Summit; Harper Pushes Free Trade*, EDMONTON SUN, Apr. 20, 2009 [hereinafter *Obama Wows Summit*].

12. *Summit of Americas "Close to Perfection"*, *supra* note 6.

13. *Obama Wows Summit*, *supra* note 11.

14. *OAS Secretary*, *supra* note 5.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

of Commitment of Port of Spain.¹⁷

The Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain was only a partial success, primarily “because of reservations by Venezuela and others who wanted stronger language on Cuba and the world financial crisis.”¹⁸ Despite reservations by the leaders on the final declaration, they were successfully able to adopt a shorter version of the document and, perhaps more importantly, “nobody left slamming the door as happened at the last summit in 2005.”¹⁹ Even though the heads of state could not achieve unanimity, Prime Minister Manning still felt that the Summit was successful.²⁰ He explained that the participating countries agreed that he alone, as chairman of the conference, should sign the document.²¹ Other sources have declared this an excellent decision as having only some signatures on the document would have made any internal disagreements public and would have ended the summit on a negative note; this could have undone any progress that was made in setting a new tone for the relationship between the United States and Latin-America.²²

II. FAILURES

Although the Summit is generally regarded as successful, even if only because of the “amicable atmosphere,” it still experienced a number of setbacks and failures. Though the approval of a shorter version of the Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain could be considered a success, it must still be noted that the longer version could not be approved, various countries still refused to sign the document, and ultimately Prime Minister Manning was the only signatory.²³ The hesitations by the participants involved various rationales; these included some countries’ perception that the financial crisis was not adequately addressed and others view that reiterating that the leaders at the Summit were democratically-elected was an additional insult to Cuba.²⁴ Ultimately, though the shorter version “was probably the least bad compromise” and may very well have preserved some of the relationships built at the Summit, the lack of consensus and signatures “robs the Port of Spain Declaration of much of its political force.”²⁵

17. *Id.*

18. *Obama Wows Summit*, *supra* note 11.

19. *Id.*

20. *Summit of Americas “Close to Perfection”*, *supra* note 6.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*; *Summit of the Americas Sparks Debate About the Future of U.S. Policy in Latin America*, CRISPES, Apr.27, 2009, http://www.cispes.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=556&Itemid=28. The member countries of the Bolivarian Alternative for the People of Our Americas (ALBA) felt particularly opposed to signing the statement for the reasons cited and because they believe that the Summit “unjustifiably excludes Cuba in a criminal manner.” *Id.*

25. *Summit of Americas “Close to Perfection”*, *supra* note 6.

Many of the Civil Society groups in the Americas felt that the Summit achieved little and left them "still awaiting the promised action and implementation plan that was supposed to have emerged from Declaration of Port of Spain."²⁶ In place of "expected assigned deadlines and responsibilities," these groups found that the summit gave no identifiable action plan, no agenda, and no solutions to current crises.²⁷ Instead, it appears to them that the summit was only held "to instruct all attending to meet again." They also give little credit to the shorter version of the Declaration that was approved, explaining that it "is no different than the some 634 mandates and commitments that governments of the region have signed on to over the last four summits, with record of minimal follow-up."²⁸

III. CONCLUSION

Although the fifth Summit of the Americas faced setbacks, most would agree that the generally amicable atmosphere alone should be considered a great success, especially when compared to prior summits. Despite this, some would consider the Summit a failure because little was accomplished in the way of policy or an action plan for the region to address current crises. Historically tense relationships between several countries, however, seem to have been improved and arguably will set the stage for more successful summits in the future.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*